

Slovakia-Japan relations: Valuable, yet underestimated

By **Róbert VANCEL***

Overview

This chapter will provide an overview of bilateral relations between Japan and the Slovak Republic. Relations between them are based on the belief in the same universal values, the role of international law and cooperation, and free trade. This gives the relationship the potential to develop in all areas, but even so, Japan-Slovakia relations are primarily economic. Yet they are also highly unbalanced in this respect. Due to the growing interest of the European Union in the Indo-Pacific region, Slovakia's relationship with Japan is changing, not only in the economic but also political, security and cultural fields. In this respect, the change in the relationship must be understood primarily through the growing interest and efforts to deepen cooperation.

Slovakia-Japan relations began to develop at the end of the 1990s, mainly on the basis of trade and the inflow of Japanese investment into the developing Slovak economy. At the same time, along with investment, comes Official Development Assistance (ODA). It is trade that best defines the nature of the relationship between the two countries. The natural imbalance in trade and the level of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) between countries is irreversible, although there is some potential for resolving disparities. The main driver of economic cooperation is the automotive industry, which has the largest share of trade between the two countries.

The political level of relations between Japan and Slovakia, which has long been marginalized, gained in importance only in the second decade of the 21st century. Political relations are developing at the bilateral level, in particular by increasing the

* Róbert Vancel is Assistant Professor at Matej Bel University, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations. Róbert can be reached at robert.vancel@umb.sk.

number of visits by representatives at the highest level. Relations are also developing at the multilateral level, notably through the V4 + Japan and EU formats.

At the level of people-to-people and cultural cooperation, it is possible to see great potential that is receiving new impetus to fulfill it. Continued support for academic cooperation and exchanges represents promising areas for the development of relations between the two nations.

History of relations

Official diplomatic relations between Japan and the Slovak Republic were established on 3 February 1993, more than a month after the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, after the division of Czechoslovakia. Slovakia opened its embassy immediately after the establishment of contacts, in February 1993. In addition to Japan, the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Tokyo represents Slovakia in three other Pacific states: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau. The Slovak Republic also has three honorary consulates in Japan, in Osaka, Kirishima and Utsunomiya. Japan established an embassy in Bratislava in January 2002.

However, relations between the two nations have had a longer history, since the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918, as official bilateral relations between the newly formed republic and Japan were established in 1919. We can also detect traces of cooperation even before the establishment of Czechoslovakia. During the First World War, Japan provided support to the Czechoslovak legions, in the form of supplies or uniforms sewn in Japan.¹ Likewise, Czechoslovak troops returned to their homeland, after an admirable campaign along the Trans-Siberian Railway, through Japan, specifically Yokohama.² The most prominent figure in the relations between the Slovak and Japanese nations in this period was certainly General Dr. Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who headed the legions and also led negotiations with Japanese officials. As a general in the French Army, he was also a member of the French delegation, which was received

¹ Martin Weiss (2015) *První československý legionář, který zemřel v Japonsku, pocházel z Boleslavska* (*The First Czechoslovak Legionnaire to Die in Japan Came from Boleslav*), Available at: https://boleslavsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/prvni-ceskoslovensky-legionar-ktery-zemrel-v-japonsku-pochazel-z-boleslavska-20151209.html (Accessed 5 May 2022).

² Ibidem.

by the Emperor himself. This audience subsequently aroused the interest of the Japanese society in the newly formed Czechoslovakia.³

During the 2000s, the most important bilateral political visit was that of Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, who visited Japan in 2005.⁴ From the Japanese side, Foreign Minister Tarō Asō visited Slovakia in 2007, while Slovak foreign ministers paid four visits to Japan in that decade: Eduard Kukan in 2000 and 2005, Ján Kubiš in 2007 and Miroslav Lajčák 2009.

In general, relations between Japan and Slovakia throughout history can be considered very good, without tensions, disagreements or conflicts. The main reason for this situation is considered to be the physical distance between the two countries and the low level of Slovakia's involvement in the affairs of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. The only problematic episode in mutual relations was when Japanese company Taisei sued the Slovak Republic for compensation for exchange rate loss in financing the construction of the Sitina tunnel as a part of D2 highway, in 2006, which was settled through international arbitration.⁵

Partnership rooted in values

Political bilateral relations between Japan and Slovakia are developing primarily against the background of multilateral cooperation, whether Visegrad Four (V4) + Japan or EU-Japan cooperation. These multilateral formats help to conclude agreements or implement specific initiatives, thus strengthening ties and facilitating cooperation between Japan and Slovakia. Meetings of representatives of the Slovak Republic and Japan on the fringes of multilateral forums also contribute to the cultivation of relations.

Based on the frequency of high-level bilateral visits between 2000 and 2021,

³ Česká televize (2018) *Štefánik v Tokiu trávil 28. říjen, legionáři se tam léčili. Vznik republiky má i japonskou stopu (Štefánik Spent October 28 in Tokyo, the Legionnaires Were Treated There. The Establishment of the Republic Also Has a Japanese Footprint)*, Available at: <https://ct24.ceskatelivize.cz/svet/2633462-stefanik-v-tokiu-travil-28-rijen-legionari-se-tam-lecili-vznik-republiky-ma-i-japonskou> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021) *Japan – Slovakia Relations*, Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/data.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁵ Pravda (2010) *NDS nemusí platit Japoncom za kurzové straty pri tuneli Sitina (The NDS Does Not Have to Pay the Japanese for Exchange Rate Losses at the Sitina Tunnel)*, Available at: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/193249-nds-nemusi-platit-japoncom-za-kurzove-straty-pri-tuneli-sitina/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

there is a clear trend of intensifying contacts between the two countries,⁶ especially in the period after 2012. That year, Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič and his wife visited Japan, marking the first visit of a Slovak Head of State to Japan. In addition to the meeting with the Imperial couple, President Gašparovič also attended the meeting with then Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. In addition to general topics, such as support for the development of bilateral relations or the development of cooperation between Slovak and Japanese universities, the Slovak president promised support for Japan in obtaining the position of Permanent Member of the UN Security Council.⁷ The presidential couple also visited the areas affected by the devastating earthquake in 2011. The turning point of 2012 continued with visits by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, and ministers of economy and finance Peter Kažimír and Tomáš Malatinský.⁸

The following year, in 2013, the historic first V4+Japan summit took place.⁹ The approximately 70-minute meeting of the prime ministers of the V4 countries and Shinzō Abe was held in the spirit of an evaluation of the economic cooperation to date, or the forthcoming Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and Japan. Also, the same year, the current emperor's brother, Crown Prince Fumihito, and his wife visited Slovakia¹⁰, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, at the invitation of President Gašparovič. In addition to the meeting with the president, the Prince and his wife met with Prime Minister Robert Fico and the vice-president of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. They spent the second part of their visit in eastern Slovakia, specifically in the High Tatras and in the Spiš region, where they visited the Botanical Garden of the Tatra National Park, the

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021) *Japan – Slovakia Relations*, Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/data.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2012) *Japan-Slovakia Summit Meeting (Summary)*, Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/meeting1206_pm.html (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Visegrad Group (2013) *Visegrad Group Plus Japan Joint Statement*, Available at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2013/visegrad-group-plus> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹⁰ Webnoviny (2013) *Japonský princ a princezná navštívia Devín i centrum mesta (The Japanese Prince and Princess Will Visit Devín and the City Center)*, Available at: <https://www.webnoviny.sk/japonsky-princ-a-princezna-navstivia-devin-i-centrum-mesta/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

library for the blind, or the UNESCO monuments Levoča and Spiš Castle¹¹.

A special chapter of the timeline of meetings, especially the visits of Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák in 2015 and 2016, must be seen in the context of his candidacy for the post of UN Secretary-General, and thus the efforts to gain support for his election. Thanks to Miroslav Lajčák and these activities, the intensity of bilateral meetings increased in the second half of the last decade, either as visits or as meetings on the edge of multilateral forums. Miroslav Lajčák was not a stranger to Japan, as he served as the second ambassador of the independent Slovak Republic in Japan, from 1994 to 1998. He later traveled two more times to Japan, as foreign minister, in 2017 and 2019.¹²

The most exceptional year of bilateral relations between Japan and Slovakia was clearly 2019. In April, Shinzō Abe became the first Japanese prime minister in history to visit Slovakia.¹³ He visited Bratislava on the occasion of the V4+Japan summit. The main topic of discussion was the relations between the Central European states and Japan in the light of the EU-Japan EPA, which entered into force in February of that year. That year, President Zuzana Čaputová also attended the enthronement ceremony of the Japanese Emperor Naruhito, and briefly met with Prime Minister Abe, with whom she discussed political and economic relations and the topic of environmental innovation. She also met with representatives of the energy company TEPCO and visited the innovative housing project Fujisawa Sustainable Town.¹⁴

The year 2020, during which the 100th anniversary of Japanese-Slovak relations and the Tokyo Summer Olympics were supposed to continue to bring visits and a rich accompanying program, was marked by a global pandemic. The Olympic Games were

¹¹ Teraz.sk (2013) *Japonský princ a princezná Akišino navštívili Vysoké Tatry a Spiš (Japanese Prince and Princess Akishino visited the High Tatras and Spiš)*, Available at: <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/japonsky-princ-akisino-tatry-spis/50402-clanok.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021) *Japan – Slovakia Relations*, Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/data.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹³ The Slovak Spectator (2019) *Japanese PM Shinzo Abe Visits Slovakia for the First Time*, Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22107324/japanese-pm-visits-slovakia-for-the-first-time.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹⁴ Pravda (2019) *Prezidentka Čaputová odcestovala do Japonska, zúčastní sa na intronizácii cisára (President Caputova has Traveled to Japan and Will Take Part in the Emperor's Enthronement)*, Available at: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/529830-prezidentka-caputova-odcestovala-do-japonska-zucastni-sa-na-intronizacii-cisara/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

moved to 2021, and planned activities for the centenary of relations were variously moved and modified.

As Japan and the Slovak Republic are parliamentary democracies, parliamentary diplomacy is an important part of their relations. Its importance is evidenced not only by the relatively high number of Diet representatives who have visited Slovakia but also by the existence of parliamentary friendship groups. The friendship group with Japan belongs to the permanent friendship groups within the National Council of the Slovak Republic. It has 13 members and its current chairman is a relatively prominent figure on the political scene, Peter Osuský, a member of the Sloboda a Solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity) governing party.¹⁵ In the past, the chairman of the group was František Šebej, a member of the Most-Híd party. He was chairman of the group for a relatively long time, of almost 10 years.¹⁶ As a former karate practitioner, he actively promoted Slovak-Japanese relations, precisely through this sport, for which he was the first Slovak to be awarded the Order of the Rising Sun with a Gold and Silver Star.¹⁷ However, MP Šebej resigned from his parliamentary seat due to his party's decisions, which led to the vacant position of the chairman of the friendship group. Subsequently, the position of chairman was occupied by another member of the Most-Híd party, Tibor Bastrnák. A doctor by profession, who was an indistinct person outside the party's electorate, he apparently did not have a stronger ambition to move the group toward a more proactive approach to building stronger ties between Japan and Slovakia.

Economic relations

Economic cooperation plays a dominant role in relations between Slovakia and Japan. However, this relationship is very unbalanced, whether it is FDI flows or trade. Thus,

¹⁵ National Council of the Slovak Republic (2022) *Skupina priateľstva s Japonskom (Group of Friendship with Japan)*, Available at: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=eu/sp/sp&SkupinaId=156> (Accessed 5 May 2022).

¹⁶ Aktuality (2017) *František Šebej získal japonské štátne vyznamenanie (František Šebej Received a Japanese State Award)*, Available at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/536853/frantisek-sebej-ziskal-japonske-statne-vyznamenanie/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹⁷ SME (2018) *Šebej získal, ako prvý Slovák, japonský Rad vychádzajúceho slnka (Šebej Was the First Slovak to Receive the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun)*, Available at: https://domov.sme.sk/c/20761098/sebej-ziskal-ako-prvy-slovak-japonsky-rad-vychadzajuceho-slnka.html#storm_gallery_83712 (Accessed 10 December 2021).

Slovakia's trade balance with Japan is markedly negative and the FDI ratio is equally unbalanced. At the same time, Slovak investments in Japan are negligible and only ESET stands out as a significant investor in Japan. On the other hand, Japan is the second most important Asian investor in Slovakia in terms of FDI, although it lags significantly behind South Korea.

The volume of Japanese FDI in Slovakia is 74 million euros.¹⁸ However, it should be noted that the benefit from Japanese companies lies not only in the inflow of investment but, for example, in job creation. It is worth mentioning that Japanese companies have created approximately 13,000 jobs in Slovakia.¹⁹ According to research by CEIAS, 60 Japanese companies operating in Slovakia pay on average more than 10.5 million euros in taxes every year.²⁰ Marelli Kechnec Slovakia, Plzeňský Prazdroj (part of the Asahi Breweries Group) and Trim Leader are among the most important Japanese companies in Slovakia in terms of the amount of taxes paid. The largest employers (from 1,000 to 1,999 employees) are Yazaki Wiring Technologies Slovakia, Panasonic Industrial Devices Slovakia and U-Shin Slovakia.²¹

Slovak investments in Japan boil down to ESET, whose 2018 investment builds on the partnership with Canon IT Solutions, with which ESET has established a joint venture. In 2019, ESET received the award in the category of the best investor from Central and Eastern Europe in the Japanese market at the first event "Japan-CEE Investment Summit & Awards."²² In Slovakia, investment promotion is primarily the agenda of the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) and peripherally of the Slovak Business Agency (SBA). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs, together with the Ministry of Economy, provides promotion of

¹⁸ National Bank of Slovakia (2020) *Dáta k PZI (FDI Data)*, Available at https://www.nbs.sk/_img/Documents/STATIST/SPB/PZI/PZI_2019_XLS.zip (Accessed 10 December 2021).

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Matej Šimalčík (2020) *Ekonomický prínos ázijských investorov pre Slovensko - daňový pohľad (Economic Benefits of Asian investors for Slovakia - Tax Perspective)*, Available at: <https://ceias.eu/sk/ekonomicky-prinos-azijskychinvestorov-pre-slovensko-danovy-pohlad/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

²¹ Matej Šimalčík (2020) *Príspevok ázijských investorov k zamestnanosti na Slovensku (The Contribution of Asian Investors to Employment in Slovakia)*, Available at: <https://ceias.eu/sk/prispevok-azijskych-investorov-k-zamestnanosti-na-slovensku/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

²² ESET (2020) *Consolidated Annual Report 2019*, p. 13, Available at: <https://www.eset.com/fileadmin/ESET/SK/Docs/Vyrocne-spravy/vyrocna-sprava-2019-eng.pdf> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

investment in third countries and assistance to entrepreneurs with applications in foreign markets.

In terms of mutual trade, the unevenness and relatively low importance of the share in the total trade of both countries are two basic characteristics. The Slovak Republic imports goods from Japan of about 500 million euros, which represents less than 1% of Slovak imports.²³ In the case of exports, Slovakia exports goods to Japan with an average annual value of 145 million euros, which represents approximately 1.5% of all Slovak exports.²⁴ In terms of mutual trade, Japan is the fourth most important trading partner among Asian countries after China, South Korea and Vietnam.²⁵ The increase in exports of almost 40 million euros between 2018 and 2019 was probably the result of the EU-Japan EPA. Given the structure of the Slovak economy, which is focused on the automotive industry, it can be assumed that export growth is related to removed trade barriers. The value of Slovak exports to Japan in 2020 was almost 199 million euros²⁶. Together with the decrease in the total value of imports, the Slovak Republic thus achieved a negative trade balance of 215 million euros, implying a deficit smaller by 160 million euros compared to 2019.²⁷

In terms of trade structure, the automotive industry has the largest share. Almost 50% of Slovak exports are made up of cars or car parts, followed by products from other engineering industries (23%) and the electrical engineering industry (9.5%).²⁸ Imports from Japan are divided relatively evenly between the electrical (27%),

²³ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic (2021) *Ekonomická informácia o teritóriu: Japonsko (Economic Information About Territory: Japan)*, Available at: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/620840/Japonsko++ekonomick%C3%A9+inform%C3%A1cie+o+terit%C3%B3riu+2021> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

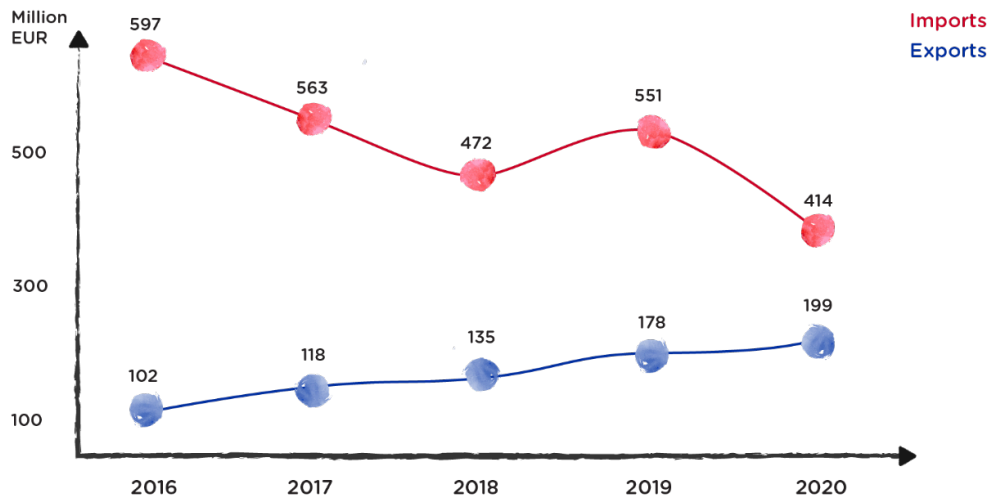
²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Atlas of Economic Complexity (2020) *What Did Slovakia Import From Japan in 2018?*, Available at: <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore?country=206&product=undefined&year=2018&tradeDirection=import&productClass=HS&target=Partner&partner=114&startYear=undefined> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

mechanical (26%) and automotive (26%) industries.²⁹ Thus, for a long time, the electronics industry, specifically batteries, dominated trade.³⁰

Slovakia's trade with Japan in million euros



Source: International Trade Center/ Trade Map

On the one hand, this concentration of Slovakia-Japan trade in three key sectors, the automotive industry, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering, poses a risk to Slovakia and its future economic development, due to the unilateral focus of the economy. In addition, the automotive sector is one of the most affected by automation, so up to 35% of jobs are directly at risk.³¹ On the other hand, these sectors provide the potential for further development of cooperation with Japan. In particular, cooperation in this area of research and development would provide the necessary added value to Slovak industry. At the opening of the Minebea plant in Košice, in 2018, the

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Mišo Hudec (2019) *Sme pripravení na revolúciu v preškolení? Automatizácia mení spôsob práce aj potrebné zručnosti (Are We Ready For a Retraining Revolution? Automation Changes the Way You Work and the Skills You Need)*, Available at: <https://euractiv.sk/section/spolocnost/news/sme-pripraveni-na-revoluciu-v-preskolovani-automatizacia-meni-sposob-prace-aj-potrebne-zrucnosti/> (Accessed 5 May 2022).

construction of a research and development center was emphasized.³² It was the proximity of the Technical University in Košice that laid the foundation for a sufficient number of qualified professionals for such a center.³³ Here, Slovakia is probably hitting its limits. It is the low quality of education that probably hinders the more intensive development of cooperation between Japan and Slovakia in the field of research and development.

Other potential areas of cooperation certainly include the transport sector, in which Japan is one of the world's leaders. The purchase of technology, the sharing of know-how or even the construction of transport infrastructure could be the basis for the development of cooperation in this area. In this context, it is necessary to mention Japan's efforts to compete with China in the construction of transport infrastructure. Although their rivalry has so far focused on Southeast and South Asia, it can extend to Europe. Another area of cooperation between Japan and Slovakia could be the energy sector, especially nuclear energy. Slovakia, like Japan, is dependent on the stable production of available electricity with an emphasis on sustainability and environmental friendliness. In this respect, cooperation in the field of nuclear energy seems natural.

An important area of Slovak-Japanese economic relations has been Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between 1993 and 2005, Japan provided the Slovak Republic with ODA worth little over 13 billion yen, or more than 101 million euros in today's money.³⁴ Of this, 415 million yen were in the form of grants, 1.49 billion yen in the form of technical assistance and 11.1 billion yen in the form of a loan for the construction of road infrastructure.³⁵ This loan was used to build a highway section: Lamačská cesta – Staré Grunty, with a length of 3.7 kilometers. The section, which was built by the Japanese-Czech consortium Taisei corporation-SKANSKA D.S., also includes the 1.4 kilometer-long Sitina

³² Korzár Košice TASR (2018) *Nový závod v Košiciach zamestná viac ako tisíc ľudí (The New Plant in Košice Will Employ More than a Thousand People)*, Available at: <https://kosice.korzar.sme.sk/c/20850991/novy-zavod-minebea-v-kosiciachzamestna-1100-ludi.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021) *Japan – Slovakia Relations*, Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/data.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

³⁵ Ibidem.

motorway tunnel.³⁶ It is interesting that the Japanese side suffered an exchange rate loss of approximately 21 million euros due to a significant strengthening of the Slovak koruna (the national currency until 2009) against the euro. This led to a dispute between the two sides. However, the International Commercial Court in Paris has ruled that the Slovak Republic does not have to compensate the loss to the Japanese company.³⁷

Cultural and people-to-people relations and perceptions of Japan

Japan is generally perceived positively in Slovakia, but there is a lack of a more thorough public opinion survey on the perception of Japan and individual aspects of Japanese culture and history.

Cooperation in the field of culture is extremely stable, with an interesting specificity being the cooperation of Japanese institutions with the Slovak Chamber Orchestra and the State Opera in Banská Bystrica.³⁸ In the field of culture and promotion of Japan, the state-owned RTVS is a highly active institution, regularly broadcasting documentary series about Japan. Promoting tourism and growth of exchanges between the two countries plays an important role in bilateral relations. An example was the signing of the Agreement on Social Security in 2017³⁹ and the launch of the Working Holiday Program for people aged 18 to 30 in 2016.⁴⁰

As far as Japanese tourists in Slovakia are concerned, the numbers aren't very high, even though the trends are positive. In 2019, 9,691 Japanese people visited Slovakia, which represented a year-on-year increase of 24%. The global pandemic

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Pravda (2010) *NDS nemusí platiť Japoncom za kurzové straty pri tuneli Sitina (The NDS Does Not Have to Pay the Japanese for Exchange Rate Losses at the Sitina Tunnel)*, Available at: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/193249-nds-nemusi-platit-japoncom-za-kurzove-straty-pri-tuneli-sitina/> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

³⁸ Štátna Opera (2021) *Keď Slovensko a Japonsko majú k sebe blízko... (When Slovakia and Japan Are Close to Each Other...)*, Available at: <https://www.stateopera.sk/sk/ked-slovensko-japonsko-maju-k-sebe-blizko>. (Accessed 10 December 2021).

³⁹ Ministry of Labour, Social Issues and Family of Slovak Republic SR (2017) *Zmluva s Japonskom o Sociálnom Zabezpečení (Social Security Agreement with Japan)*, Available at: <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/informacie-media/aktuality/zmluva-japonskom-socialnom-zabezpeceni.html>. (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁴⁰ Embassy of Japan in the Slovak Republic (2016) *Program pracovných dovolení medzi Japonskom a Slovenskou republikou (Working Holiday Program Between Japan and the Slovak Republic)*, Available at: https://www.sk.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/00_000299.html (Accessed 10 December 2021).

situation has damaged the tourism sector, when the number of visitors to Slovakia decreased by almost 80% compared to the first half of 2019.⁴¹ However, we can assume that after the end of the pandemic, the situation will gradually be restored and the number of tourists will return to pre-pandemic levels. In this regard, a well-timed campaign will be needed to support the influx of tourists from East Asia to Slovakia.

Education and research are an important area of cooperation with the potential for further development. In 2016, 32 cooperation agreements were signed between state and private universities, colleges and other institutions.⁴² At the same time, cooperation in this area is influenced by a relatively wide range of grant schemes and research and study scholarships in Japan, which mostly operate on an annual basis.

Regarding the study of fields related to Japan, the only Slovak university that provides Japanese studies is Comenius University, in Bratislava. Japanese can be studied at various levels in private language schools. However, their offer is limited and uneven within Slovakia. In Slovakia, there is no offer of study programs focused on modern East Asian studies. In this regard, the Japanese initiative to provide financial support for research on issues related to Japan, through the so-called Chair Program, opens up opportunities for change in this area. However, due to the weak experience of the Slovak academic community with similar programs, as well as the low number of people specialized on Japan, the implementation of the program will not be an easy matter.

Regarding the number of citizens living in the other country, the numbers are relatively balanced and stable, at around 300. According to the Japanese side, 250 Japanese lived in Slovakia in 2020 and 355 Slovaks lived in Japan.⁴³

As already mentioned, one of the important determinants of mutual Slovak-Japanese relations is physical distance. This is exacerbated by the absence of a direct

⁴¹ Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic (2020) *Ubytovacia štatistika 2019 (Accommodation Statistics 2019)*, Available at: <https://www.mindop.sk/ministerstvo-1/cestovny-ruch-7/statistika/ubytovacia-statistika/rok-2019/navstevnici-v-ubytovacich-zariadeniach-cr-na-slovensku-za-rok-2019> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁴² Embassy of Japan in the Slovak Republic (2016) *Slovensko-Japonská Medziuniverztná Výmena 2016 (Slovakia-Japanese Interuniversity Exchange 2016)*, Available at: <https://www.sk.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000146559.pdf> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021) *Japan – Slovakia Relations*, Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/slovak/data.html> (Accessed 10 December 2021).

transport connection, in this case an air connection. Currently, there is no direct flight connection between Japan and Slovakia, especially due to the location of the largest Slovak airport in Bratislava, which is less than an hour's drive from Vienna's much larger and more important international airport and three hours' drive from Budapest Airport. This, in turn, is closer to a large part of Slovakia than Bratislava. However, even these do not provide direct flights but only flights with at least one transfer, most often in Istanbul, Paris or London. Due to the proximity of larger air hubs, it is unlikely that a direct air connection will be established in the future.

Conclusions

Slovakia-Japan relations are currently entering a new phase, mainly due to global changes, which are forcing global actors to increase their interest and engagement in East Asia and, respectively, in the Indo-Pacific region. One of these actors is the European Union, of which Slovakia is a member state. As shown by the results of the EPA between Japan and the EU, this change benefits the Slovak-Japanese relationship. The basis on which Slovaks and Japanese will build their relations is relatively solid, anchored in all areas: political, economic, cultural, interpersonal. However, given the weak awareness of Japanese realities and the overall importance of Japan for Slovakia, especially as an economic partner, there is a lack of human capacity ready to guide Slovakia's direction in relation to Japan in a changing world. Slovakia will have to defend its interests in relation to Japan, especially in the EU, and to this end it will be necessary to have sufficient human and material capacities to be able to come up with initiatives that will ultimately strengthen bilateral relations with the East Asian partner. In the near future, it will be necessary to reflect on the ongoing global changes in medium-term strategic documents, while strengthening relations with Japan will certainly be one of the priorities in Slovakia's relationship with East Asia.

Cooperation in the V4+Japan group is proving to be an important tool for developing bilateral relations. It is understandable that the Japanese perceive this format as useful in relation to the four Central European states. Many of the meetings of the top representatives of Slovakia and Japan took place on the occasion of the V4+Japan summit. Likewise, the first and, so far, only visit of a Japanese prime minister to

Slovakia was organized on the occasion of the Slovak Presidency of the V4 group. This format also has some potential in terms of shaping European strategies and policies, but it runs into its own damaged reputation.

It will also be necessary to come up with innovative ways of attracting Foreign Direct Investment from Japan, but this will have to be linked to R&D support, especially in areas related to the automotive, engineering and electrical engineering industries. Furthermore, the Slovak Republic should strive for investment or cooperation with Japan in the field of energy transport, sustainable development or green technologies. These areas have a relatively high potential for developing cooperation. Balancing the significantly negative trade balance between Slovakia and Japan is in principle excluded. However, companies operating in Slovakia can strive to participate in subcontracting chains, especially in the already mentioned industries. This would help increase the volume of exports from Slovakia to the hard-to-penetrate Japanese market.

With regard to cultural and interpersonal relations, it would be appropriate to mutually strengthen, in particular, student exchange programs, scholarship programs, or to actively work on connecting the academic sphere. The promotion of Slovak culture in Japan and vice versa, not only the traditional one, deserves a more significant space in the media but also through events for the general public. However, due to the ongoing pandemic situation, these options are limited. With the upcoming EXPO 2025, which will be held in Osaka, Japan, it is necessary for Slovakia to thoroughly prepare the presentation and content of the Slovak part of the exhibition. It will be a unique opportunity to present itself not only to the Japanese public but also to investors

In 2023, the Slovak Republic and Japan will celebrate 30 years of diplomatic relations. Even in the context of the above opportunities, the opening fourth decade of Slovak-Japanese relations has the opportunity to be not only more successful than before but, in many ways, also more innovative and better in terms of quality.

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